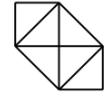
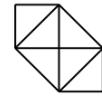


The Chilean capital of Santiago has recently been at the heart of social unrest, the like of which hasn't been seen since the military coup of the 1970s. But, amid the turmoil, professional rugby is making its first tentative steps as the country aims to move out from the shadow of Argentina.

Pictures by Pawel Fabjanski



This page: Laguna Miscanti, Chile. Opposite clockwise from top left: the Atacama desert, The Plaza Baquedano in Santiago, popularly called Plaza Italia, which has been the epicenter of popular uprising in Chile since last October, the setting sun on the mountains close to Vicuña and the Lago Gray Glacier.



Chile presents, at the moment, a rare conundrum: scenic beauty on one side, ugly scenes on the other. The gargantuan Andes mountain range sits as a silent witness to a scene of Chileans fighting Chileans. If only this was restricted to the rugby field.

It all erupted last October with the rise in price of public transport. The silent majority quickly became a large and visible crowd of protesters, with more than a million 'chilenos' taking to the streets. Public places fell into the hands of the protesters and clashes with the Carabineros de Chile (national police force) became commonplace.

The lack of answers from the country's leaders and politicians resulted in violence not seen on Chile's streets since the early 1970s, when Chile was in the grip of a military coup.

Even now, months after the first protest, it is an ongoing issue. Like bushfire, just when it seems it's getting under control, it sparks off again, the crowds return to take the streets in cities and towns from north to south and, of course, in the middle of Chile where Santiago is located.

One of the most modern capital cities in South America, Santiago is nestled in the Andes, with skyscrapers and rocky peaks making for an intriguing contrast. The juxtaposition of natural beauty and modern-day living can also be seen as the sun sets and smog particles are lit up brightly by the last remaining rays of the day.

Workers at the Chilean Rugby Federation headquarters are afforded a fine view of this daily splash of colour, given its location in the highest permitted altitude for buildings in the city, at almost 850 metres above sea level. The federation moved its offices here in 2000 and there is also a rugby pitch, albeit in dire need of

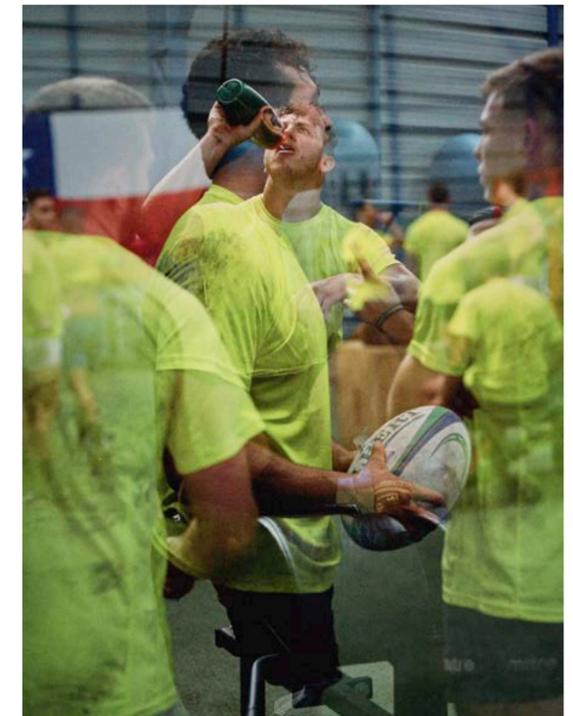
attention, a gymnasium, changing rooms and a three-storey office block where staff work on improving the wellbeing of the Chilean game.

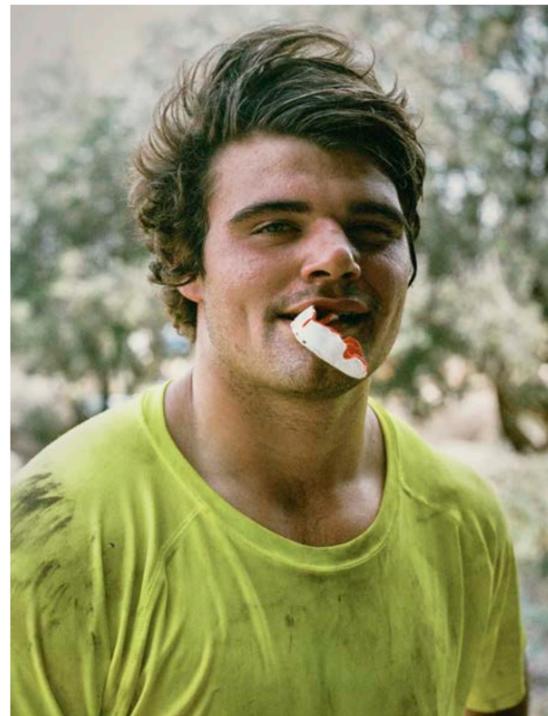
Days are longer in the middle of summer, which comes in very handy for the newly-created Superliga Americana de Rugby, alongside a professional team each from Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil and, from 2021, Colombia.

The new Chilean team/franchise is aptly named Selknam, in honour of the indigenous people in Patagonia and their spirit and endeavour in fighting the elements and anything else that came their way with stoicism until the tribe became extinct.

Rugby is not oblivious to what is happening in the country. In the old days, when rugby was an elite sport, a rise in public transport would not have been an issue for those involved. Brought to the country in the late 19th century, rugby was based around three English schools in the country: Craighouse and The Grange School in the expensive neighbourhoods of Santiago, and The Mackay School, a stone's throw away from the beach in Reñaca, in Viña del Mar, close to the country's biggest and most active port of Valparaíso. The old boys' clubs formed off the back of the schools would then provide the foundation for the game to grow in both cities.

Still, Chile were comparative latecomers to rugby, compared to say Argentina where the game was first played in 1873, long before it reached the rest of South America. The Los Pumas first played Chile in 1936, winning 29-0, and since then, the result has been repeated over and over. Forty-five matches. Forty-five wins for Argentina with over 2,000 points put on Chile and only 336 scored. »





» To say Chile had a fair weather attitude to rugby in the past would be a misnomer. Whenever the sun was out, rugby would take second place to skiing – the closest ski resort can be found just 45 minutes to the east of Santiago – or the beach; you can have sand in your toes in about one hour from the same starting point. Chile's obvious natural advantages don't always make for a committed rugby community.

If you look at Chile on a map, it is a long, thin, country. From top to bottom it is 4,270 kilometres, whilst the furthest you can ever be from the sea is only ever 400km.

These are two strong reasons why, putting aside for a moment the country's current social unrest, Chile is such a great rugby touring destination, something that has helped the game, with British school sides visiting the country as part of a well-trodden circuit that includes Argentina and, occasionally, Uruguay too.

While Chilean rugby has always been used to taking a backseat to Argentinean rugby, Uruguay and Brazil have overtaken them too, but they are trying to make amends quickly. "We are proud to say that rugby is now played in every corner of the country," says former international referee and the current Chilean Rugby Federation chairman Christian Rudloff.

At 43, 'Lulo' has been tasked with taking Chile's rugby game to the next level – 'high performance' is the phrase on everybody's lips now when it comes to rugby here. "Chilean rugby has historically been all about internal competition," he says, recounting the story of its origins. "First at school level and then with a number of traditional clubs such as the Prince of Wales Country Club, Universidad Católica and Stade Français, as well as COBS, Old Macks and Old Boys, all former pupils' clubs."

The game reached a peak in the 1970s, with a good following and had spread beyond the two main cities of Santiago and Viña del Mar, with Concepción (home of Troncos and Old John's) making for a 1,000km round trip.

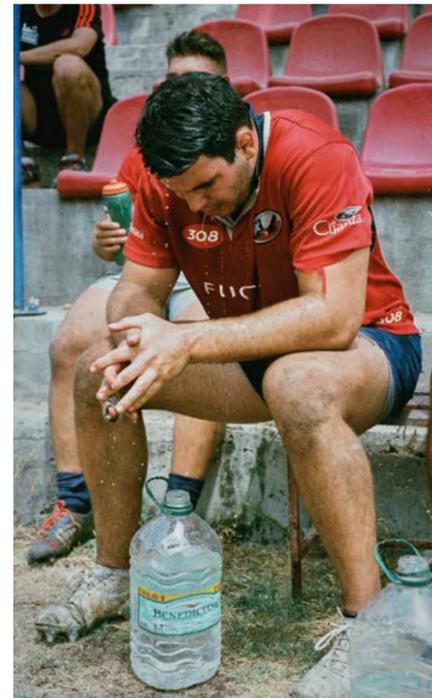
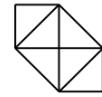
Today, figures suggest Chile has 99 clubs and some 20,000 players of all ages. A new registration system should see those figures increase. "Registration will allow us to know how many more are playing the game, formalise their engagement with the game, and ensure they are covered by insurance," says Christian. "We are sure we have more players involved. When we are done, we'll know for certain."

"At club level it is social rugby wanting to be competitive," says Christian. "We have players that, having been involved in national teams, have now got a glimpse of what can be achieved with a bigger international calendar and lofty goals. And now they demand more from us officials."

The arrival of the Americas Rugby Championship in 2016, with Tests against USA, Canada, Brazil and Uruguay, plus a non-cap game against Argentina XV every year, offered regular competition of a higher standard. However, the Chilean Córdoros have only ever won once – the inaugural game against the Brazilian Tupis in February 2016. Next August, when the ARC is played for a fifth time, they will try to break an awful record of nineteen consecutive tournament losses.

Pablo Lemoine is a name familiar to many. The former Bristol Shoguns, Stade Français and Uruguay prop who played in two Rugby World Cups, and famously broke England's defence in Brisbane one balmy night in 2003 for a much-celebrated try – albeit, in a 111-13 loss. He also coached his country in England 2015. To qualify for each one of Uruguay's four Rugby World Cups, Chile had to be beaten and Lemoine was heavily involved in three of these campaigns, only once losing to Los Córdoros in a fourteen-year career. He was responsible for setting up the successful high performance programme in Uruguay that led to Los Teros playing in the last two tournaments and putting together the Charrúa Centre, a high performance facility unequalled in the region.

Now though, he's switched sides. "I can see the irony of coming to Chile as a Uruguayan, but they've had French, Kiwi and Argentine coaches before," says Pablo, who is based at The Centro de Alto Rendimiento de Rugby. »



» He made the three-hour flight from Montevideo to settle in Santiago in 2018, arriving with the full support of World Rugby and Sudamérica Rugby, the regional association. He was tasked with repeating his high performance trick here; many saw this as Chile's last opportunity to make a mark on rugby. "Experience at home taught me a lot, not only about the processes that needed to be put in place, but it prepared me for the challenges that would lie ahead," he says.

This morning, players are arriving in their droves at the CARR, for a sevens tournament. Rugby never used to be played at this time of year in Chile – mid-summer – but things have changed. It is a new dawn for Chilean Rugby. The future is taking shape day after day, in a way never before seen. Challenges are huge and there is a renewed sense of responsibility coming from players, coaches and officials. "Players did not know what high performance was or meant," says Pablo. "Now that systems are in place, we will find more than capable players, hungry to grow and take life experiences that will help them in their career and on to the future."

Christian, who lived for ten years in China before returning to Chile a couple of years ago, believes the optimism is well-founded. "There is rugby in Punta Arenas in the south and Arica in the north, as well as Rapa Nui (formerly Easter Island)," he says. "It is our job to solidify the structures. We've only been in charge for a few months."

To understand the challenges of the country, you only need to look at a map. There are almost 5,000kms from the southernmost to the northernmost club, with the climate going from one extreme to the other.

Take Rapa Nui, for instance, where the local rugby club needs a four-hour flight for any away game.

Rugby needs to be self-sustainable on the island, given the distance and the small population of just 5,000. They play sevens and have an international

tournament every November. If the old motto, 'have boots, will travel' is to be followed, that tournament should be on every side's 'must visit' list.

The island, best known for its Moais, stone-carved human figures with oversized heads, is part of the Maori triangle, with New Zealand and Hawaii. Unfortunately, the lack of population on Rapa Nui means there are insufficient numbers to generate high quality rugby players, but the Maori ancestry is certainly noticeable when you walk through Hanga Roa, the island's main town.

It might be small here, but rugby has a social effect, giving local children some sense of belonging and discipline, sometimes lacking in such a naturally diverse environment.

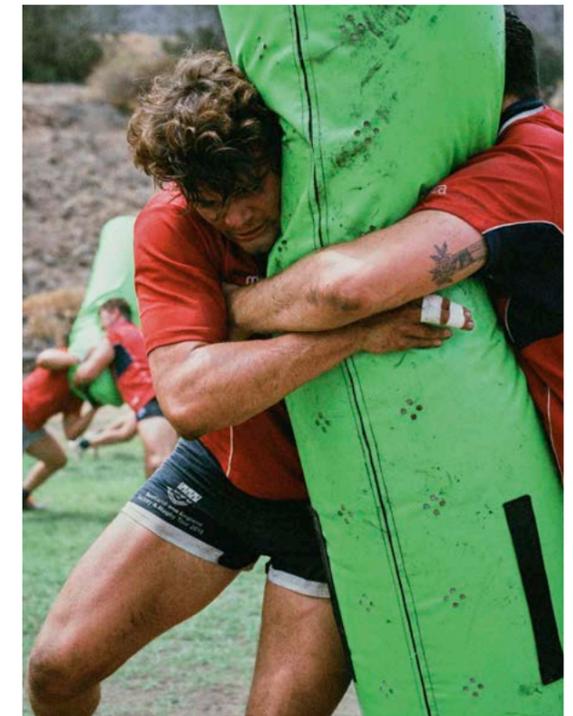
Former Chilean Rugby Union President Miguel Ángel Mujica Brain is now the country's National Olympic Committee Chairman. But even in his new Olympic position, Mujica Brain still has a sound opinion when it comes to all things rugby. "In the old days, national teams would only prepare for events, players were in a bubble," he says. "When we started going to the old FIRA U19 tournaments, things started to change."

Under his leadership, Chile organised two IRB [as it was then] age-grade world tournaments, but when he left the federation in 2007, there was a slump, with a lack of new projects taking their toll on the overall health of the game, resulting in declining numbers. "Now I see that the game is back on its feet, trying to move forward," he says. "They have a four-year plan; I travel a lot in my country and rugby is now everywhere."

"Four years ago, the Santiago Union had twelve clubs, now there are 53. It used to be the game the rich played; now it is a game for everyone wanting to enjoy the sport and the values the come with it."

"Rugby can be found in areas that, in years gone by, would have been unheard of. Society could do with more rugby. I wonder how much of the current

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» scenario would have not happened if more of my countrymen played rugby.”

To aid the growth of rugby, a well-connected sports marketing company, 1190, have been brought in. Not just as a third party, but as part of the organisation. A new company has been formed: RCM (Rugby Chile Management), owned by the Chilean Rugby Union, 1190 and a number of former players that wanted to invest in the game. “This project will modernise Chile Rugby’s structures, generating income for the game to use over the next four years,” says Michael Black, a consultant working for 1190 and a former FIFA director of marketing and competitions. “Our history is well known, and I am not exaggerating in saying that this is a new dawn, the biggest step forward that we’ve ever taken. We are talking about innovation, new technologies, big data, OTT ...all steps that will take rugby in the right direction.”

He’s talking to us over lunch at the Prince of Wales Country Club (PWCC) on the outskirts of Santiago. There’s plenty of rugby links within the club. One member is Iain Campbell, the prodigious back who was inducted into World Rugby’s Hall of Fame in 2012 – together with his older brother Donald, who died in service during the Second World War – for their deeds over 30 years of senior rugby for club and country. Ian, soon to turn 92, can still be seen walking the manicured gardens of his beloved PWCC, mingling with the younger generations, always talking rugby.

In the plush clubrooms of the PWCC, the feeling is very British, with a bit of “Spanglish” spoken.

Another current member of the club is Ignacio Silva, a first generation rugby player, with parents that knew nothing of the game when he took it up as a teenager. He’s set to lead the Selknam team. At 30, the chance to become a full-time pro arrived, and he took it with both hands. He’s also the senior statesman in a squad averaging just 24 years of age. “It has been hard, lots of disappointments after huge efforts,” the flanker says of Chile’s rugby history.

“It pushes you down and then you pick yourself up and try again. But it is hard.

Social unrest affected him and his family. They own a fruit and vegetable distribution company, servicing supermarkets, many of which were vandalised during the dark days of November and December.

“Others have had it much worse than us, but the country has suffered big time which is sad. Tourism has been affected, construction,” he says acknowledging that living in Santiago had become too expensive for those on minimum wages and it was an accident waiting to happen. “Fortunately, rugby has not been affected and professional rugby will generate funds to take the game to more and more people.”

Violence has, however, affected football, which needed to postpone its domestic competition for a couple of months. When it restarted, it had to be cancelled again and word is that they might cancel the season until things return to normal.

The new rugby season starts in March, with Selknam due to play their opening fixture on 4th March away to Montevideo in Uruguay and play their first home game ten days later, against Ceibos at the Universidad Católica stadium – the home one of Chile’s ‘big three’ football sides.

They’re expecting a crowd of 4,000 fans, reflecting the game’s current stature in Chile. On the plus side, the modest audience won’t provide enough of a platform for protestors, so it should take place free from distractions.

At this stage of Chile’s development, what really matters is not who is watching, but who is on the pitch, namely professional rugby players. “This professional project will bring more seriousness to the game,” says Ignacio. “It is no longer about playing two halves in order to enjoy the third half and party hard.

“I love rugby and being able to play professionally means I have the best job in the world.” 🏉

Story by Frankie Degees